

A Comparative Study of Religions

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HAVE YOU EVER come across a statement that is widely accepted as true but you harbour certain doubts about it simply because you haven't seen any evidence, for or against it? Such statements are often presented—whether in a newspaper article or in a drawing room discussion—without the facts. Let me present a few examples.

“All politicians are corrupt.”

“The rich become rich by trampling on the poor.”

“Affirmative action uplifts socially disadvantaged groups.”

“All religions are basically the same.”

“History is replete with patriarchy.”

It is immaterial what socio-political ideologies or economic theories are behind such statements. Isn't it singular that you and I are expected to take them as true without personally examining the evidence? *Is it inappropriate to ask for proof? Is it damnable to seek the facts? Should we feel ashamed in looking for data?*

Unless substantiated by facts, a statement is simply a notion or at best, an opinion. One such notion is “All religions are basically the same.” I've heard it many times, spoken by relatives and friends, movie stars and reporters, politicians and teachers. I have seen heated debates coming to a soft landing with someone in the group declaring, “But as you know, ultimately, all religions are the same. They speak about the same fundamental values.” Those who aren't satisfied with stating it so plainly might seek to add a modicum of what they think is nuance and say, “You see, the problem is with the fundamentalists who wrongly interpret the religion. It all depends on *context* and *interpretation*. In essence, every religion says the same basic things.” Even a cursory glance at the history of post-Independent India will make it evident that the said notion (notoriously sloganized as *Sarva-dharma sama bhaava*) has been underscored time and again. When a notion is thrust upon a society with such persistence, it gets elevated to the status of a truism. And how dare one question the premise of an axiom!

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Are all Religions Basically the Same?

What does one really mean when she claims that all religions are the same? It is obvious that all religions are not *identical* so this statement probably means that the *ultimate underlying principle* of all religions is the same. On what basis do we determine that?

Let us consider a broader meaning for the statement – *faith is fundamental to humans and is a prerequisite for religion; in this fundamental sense, all religions are same*. Even so, it is practically pointless to make such a statement. For instance, a two-thousand rupee note is made up of atoms and so is a twenty rupee note. Would it be prudent for me to ask you for the former in exchange for the latter? If I told you, “Ultimately, it’s all made up of atoms,” would you agree? Even the greatest champion of equality or the staunchest socialist would laugh at such a proposition. It is precisely the difference in value that drives the material world. A rupee is not equal to a rouble, a diploma is not equal to a doctorate, a girlfriend is not equal to a wife. Even in the emotional and intellectual spheres of humans, it is the differences in value that drive us. While discussing religion, therefore, it is hardly useful in making a blanket statement like the one which I have alluded to earlier.

We must first examine the evidence and embark upon some amount of study. Those who are serious to know about religion may choose to undertake an in-depth study and independent analysis while those who are merely curious may read a few books by scholars who have examined the subject thoroughly from various angles.

Comparing One Religion with Another

We must begin by acknowledging that most of us are biased. Owing to our birth, upbringing and surroundings, it is natural to be biased towards a certain culture and religious system. In the process of our study, we must consciously try to keep bias aside to the extent possible. Only then can we look at the various religions *as they are*, without any colouring that stems from our bias and without our attributing meaning to something based on our assumptions.

Our comparative study can be taken up under four broad categories –

1. Origins,
2. Scriptures,
3. Historical Development and
4. Status Today.

1. Origins

The birth of a religion is an important parameter for our study. We must examine the following: When, where and how did the religion start? Is there a definite point in history when the religion began or was it a cultural consciousness that slowly got streamlined into a system of faith? Does the religion have a single founder or did it evolve from the society? What are the geographical, economic and cultural conditions of the place of origin? Was there an 'original' religion from which this was born or did it begin independently? What do the historical accounts say about the origins and what do the mythological accounts say? Studying the origins of a religion gives us an idea of where they come from, both literally and metaphorically.

2. Scriptures

The beliefs and values of a religion are typically collected and handed down through the generations. These instructions and revelations might be in the form of poems, songs, or aphorisms transferred by means of an oral tradition, or through a book, or by means of certain ritualistic practices. We must examine these foundational works of the religions in question. Does it have a holy book or not? Does it have only one holy book or does it have many? Which are the canonical works of the religion? What is the hierarchy of these works? Does the religion have a spiritual foundation? What are the moral values espoused in them? How does the religion define god and divinity? What do the scriptures say about the role of the individual and free will? What is the nature of the universe? What does the religion say about the human condition? According to the fundamental tenets, what is human bondage and how can the faithful attain liberation from these bindings? What is the ultimate state that the faithful can attain? Is there a possibility of transcending the textual injunctions and moving into a realm of pure philosophy? What does the religion say about after-life? Is there rebirth or not? What does it say about heaven and hell? What are the historical and mythological accounts recorded in the texts or oral narratives? What are their prescriptions for law and society? Is the emphasis on creed or conduct, faith or reason? What do the scriptures ordain about dealing with people who don't share the same faith? Is there magnanimity in the way atheists are to be treated? Are there contradictory statements in the texts? Is there an inherent mechanism to resolve such contradictions? In case of a clash, what is to be preferred – the letter of the scripture, the life of the founder of the faith, or the common sense of the time? Are all pronouncements of the scriptures unique to the said religion or have they been borrowed from an older religion? Did other religions borrow from

this one? Have these scriptures spawned secondary literature (like epics, parables, poems, novels, etc.) related to the faith? What is the nature of such works? When did the canonical texts of the religion first get translated into the languages of the masses? What are the creations of art, inventions of science and innovations in humanities that the scriptures have inspired? A thorough study of the scriptures—especially in the original language—helps us understand the basic mindset of the faithful. And if we are unable to read and understand the primary texts of a religion in the original, it will be valuable to read a translation by one who is competent and sensitive. It is important that the translator fulfils all these three qualities – *i.* born in that country and culture, *ii.* sincere practitioner of that faith and *iii.* an erudite and multifaceted scholar in the subject.

A note here about interpretation. When we take a certain line from a scripture, the basic expectation is to see it in the context of the larger work. Having done that, we see the tradition of commentators and interpreters in order to get an idea of how the interpretation proceeded across the centuries. Then we examine if the scripture allows for a different sort of interpretation than what has been given by earlier commentators. Only then can we claim to that someone has given a different—or wrong—interpretation to the text.

3. Historical Development

The evolution of a religion across time gives our study a new dimension. How did the practice of the religion change with changes in society? Has the relationship between the adherents and the scriptures changed over time and what is the nature of the change? How did the religion spread – was it by voluntary conversion, proselytization, or by force? Was the spread restricted to a particular geography? Was the society entirely controlled by the religion? How did the adherents of the faith live when their religion ruled over the land and how did they fare when they were minorities in the land? Is there an exit option in the religion? What is the price to be paid for quitting the faith (apostasy)? How is the relationship between the faithful and the apostates? What were the changes in the religion in the first hundred years, the first five hundred years, the first thousand years and so on, when compared to the other religion(s)? At various points of time in history, how did these religions fare – what was their geographical spread, what were their socio-cultural practices, what were their laws, etc. in a given era? What are the instances of dissent within the faith and what sub-groups emerged? How did the followers of these sub-groups treat each other? How did the faithful treat the faithless? When did the religions under consideration first encounter one another? What is the nature of those encounters? And what is the nature of

the encounters of a certain religion with other major religions across history? The study of the history of the religion gives us an idea of the manner in which the faithful have brought into practice the precepts of their religion.

A sub-set of the study of the religion's history is the study of how the religion influenced law, arts, science, society and the natural environment over the years. To what extent has the religion been a part of governance? What portion of the laws has been framed based on religious beliefs? Have there been any reformations in law and society that deviate from the original premise and principles of the scriptures? What are the earliest examples of this? Did the religion clash with scientific growth? Did the religion put restrictions on the kind of art that has to be produced? Which aspects of society were not controlled by religion? Is the behaviour of a certain society common to all cultures and ages or is it unique to the said religion in a specific period? How did the adherents of the faith treat scientists, artists, politicians, soldiers, intellectuals and so on? While it is natural for religion to influence society, to what extent did the religion hold on to its spiritual core in practice? What is the spiritual depth accomplished in the lives of the adherents? This study will give us an insight into the role played by the religion in the societal development of a culture or country. It will also show which religions are more amenable for socio-cultural progress.

4. Status Today

With the perspective of the origins, scriptures and historical development of a religion, we can now come to examine its status today. What is the geographical spread of the religion and how many adherents does it have? Is there a central authority of the religion that gives direction or is there a federal structure that offers greater independence? What is the role played by the religious institutions in deciding policy matters? What do the faithful continue to believe in? What are the percentages of people who are staunch believers, partial believers and deracinated/non-believers? How do these groups treat each other in a given religion? What is the attitude of adherents towards fundamentalists of their religion and towards the liberals? To what extent does the religion interfere in governance, economics and society? What portion of the law is still based on religious beliefs? What is the nature and number of violent crimes committed in the name of religion? Who are the heroes (historical and contemporary) revered in the religion? Do adherents respect critics and reformers (in the past and in the present)? Are the faithful open-minded in discussions relating to their religion? Does the religion allow for freedom of speech (including comedy and satire)? How agreeable are modern liberal values to the religious-minded people? What

is the ecological awareness of the adherents of a certain faith? What are the challenges faced by the religion in adapting to modernity? As a religio-cultural migrant group, to what degree do the adherents integrate with the 'foreign' faith and culture? How do they treat religious minorities in a country where they form the majority? A close examination of these questions will give us an idea of where the religion stands today. When juxtaposed with the historical development and the pronouncements of the scriptures, we can also get an idea if the present-day situation is a norm or an aberration and whether it is an improvement or a regression in light of their fundamental principles.

How to Compare?

The comparisons we make between two religions have to be specific to the categories listed above – by posing the same question to both religions. To take a line from the scripture of one religion and compare that with a specific behaviour of adherents of another religion in a modern period is bound to give a skewed picture. Compare the scriptures of the two religions, compare the origins, compare their behaviour today, compare the heroes revered in the faith and so forth. This will help pin-point the differences and also identify the similarities. Studying the historical development also gives us an idea into the sharing of ideas across religions; we can identify the unique elements in a certain religion as well as the borrowed elements. In fact, even if you wish to study just your own religion or preferred ideology, it will be helpful to undergo this exercise.

Conclusion

With the information overload today, it is easy to lose sight of the truth. The ground is rich for the sowing the seeds of poisonous propaganda; all the more reason we must be alert not to blindly believe the notions thrust upon us. The present essay is an attempt to provide a set of questions that will drive a rational and balanced inquiry into the nature of religions. Based on your interest and curiosity, your study can be long-drawn and deep or focussed and cursory, but it is essential to invest some time and thought before making generalizations. At least listen to a few lectures, watch a few videos, read a few books and discuss with a few erudite scholars as well as honest adherents. Even a little bit of effort in the quest for truth will yield great dividends. Let us go closer to the truth, which as we know, always triumphs in the end.

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